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ABSTRACT

Noting that few studies have assessed the long-term correlates of maternal employment during infancy, this study assessed the quality of college-age students' current relationships with their parents as a function of the employment status of their parents during the respondents' childhood. Participating in the research were 822 college students enrolled in introductory psychology courses and ranging in age from 18 to 27 years. Participants completed the Maternal Relationship Scale and Paternal Relationship Scale, and the Childhood Appraisal Scale as well as providing background information. Respondents reported more negative attitudes toward their mothers if the mother was employed full-time during the child's infancy, and more positive attitudes if the mother was not employed during that time in the child's life. Part-time maternal employment was associated with relationship scores in between the other two groups. On most of the measures, relationships with fathers showed parallel effects. (Contains 16 references.) (KB)

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The Association between Maternal Employment and Young Adults' Subsequent Relationships with their Parents

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Abstract

This study assessed the quality of college-aged students' current relationships with their parents as a function of the employment status of their parents during the respondents' childhood. An analysis of the responses indicated that respondents reported more negative attitudes toward their mothers if the mother was employed full-time during the child's infancy, and more positive attitudes if the mother was not employed during that time in the child's life. Part-time maternal employment was associated with relationship scores in between the other two groups. On most of the measures, relationships with fathers showed parallel effects.

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Introduction

Research about the effects of maternal employment and child-care on the psychological development of children has been stimulated by social reality. Industrialized societies, including the United States, have witnessed two simultaneous social trends: an increase in the number of mothers in the work force and a decrease in the age at which children enter child care arrangements (Hayes, 1990). These trends, in conjunction with cultural beliefs, psychological theories, and research findings emphasizing the important role of mothers in early development have motivated researchers to investigate the effects of maternal employment and of child care on the development of infants and older children.

There are several determinants of maternal employment during the first year of infancy. Among them are socioeconomic factors, parental characteristics, infant characteristics, and contextual characteristics.

When regarding socioeconomic factors, it is of no surprise to learn that women return to work after the birth of an infant because of economic considerations and financial security. For instance, in a national survey of 1,400 women who had given birth to their first child between 1968 and 1972, it was found that those women who returned to work sooner were in greatest economic need. Furthermore, women with higher levels of education returned to work sooner after the birth of their first baby and had a higher labor force participation rate throughout the first year of the baby's life than did women with less education (McLaughlin, 1982). On the basis of these findings, it was concluded that women with higher levels of education and women in families with lower incomes before the baby's birth would be more likely to resume full-time employment within the first year after the birth than those women with less education or those with higher levels of family income.

Beyond socioeconomic factors, the decision to return to work after the birth of a child is likely to be related to psychosocial attributes of the mother. Employed mothers are more likely to adhere to nontraditional sex roles, are generally more career-oriented, and place less emphasis on the importance of exclusive maternal care than non-employed mothers.

In addition, it is noted that mothers who returned to work soon after the infant's birth were less nurturing, less disorganized under stress, and had a greater aversion to infant fussiness than those mothers who stayed at home (Hock, 1978).

It is also likely that the difficulty or fussiness of the infant plays some part in a woman's decision to return to employment, although very few studies have actually examined the relation between infant temperament and maternal employment. One exception is a study, which indicated that mothers of temperamentally difficult children (e.g., low adaptability, negative mood) and mothers of infants with chronic physical problems during early months of life were less likely to be employed during the infant and toddler years (Galambos, 1987). In contrast, when women who planned to stay home, but then returned to work during the infant's first year were compared with those with similar plans who remained at home throughout the first year, no differences in infants' temperament were found between the two groups (Hock, 1985).

In addition to demographic, parental, and infant characteristics, aspects of the family environment and the workplace most likely play a role in determining maternal employment. Specifically, the quality of marital relations, husbands' participation in housework, and the stresses associated with balancing work and family responsibilities have implications for women's employment during the first year after the baby's birth. It was noted that when marriages were in trouble and there was a high risk of divorce, wives were more likely to be employed so as to reduce the risks associated with divorce (Greene, 1982).

It is also of interest to note that the features of a woman's workplace might also influence her decision to return to work. Conceivably, if the work environment is not sensitive to family needs or is seen as unpleasant or stressful, some women may be less inclined to return to work or actually change their mind once the child is born. On the other hand, women in prestigious careers would lose more occupational rewards, both financially and professionally, if they were to choose not to return to work after their infant's birth.

Nearly all of the child-care debate ("Is child care harmful?") has focused upon infant care. Few have proposed that preschool children over the age of three years are likely to be harmed by good quality, non-maternal care, since they benefit from interactions with peers and other adults. Infants under 12 months, or perhaps 24 months, are said by some to be emotionally harmed by separation from their mothers (Belsky, 1986). Attachments made by infants were less often secure if there were extensive non-maternal periods due to day care during their first year of life. The importance of secure attachment is questionable, however, when it is noted that only 8% fewer infants with extensive early non-maternal care have secure attachments to mother (Clarke-Stewart, 1987).

An extensive review of studies in this area concluded that age at entry into non-maternal care has not proved to have a substantial effect on any aspects of children's development (Clarke-Stewart, 1987). More recent studies of this issue have found similar results. The impact of early entry into child-care on cognitive skills and socio-emotional adjustment was investigated by following a large sample of Swedish children from their first year through 13 years of age. When tested at age 8, children who had entered high-quality center-based care before the age of 1 were found to have received more favorable ratings from caregivers and higher scores on cognitive tests than children who had entered center care later or those who had remained at home. Similar results were obtained at age 13. Entry into high quality child care centers at the end of the first year continued to show positive effects on children's intellectual, social, and emotional development into their early teens (Andersson, 1989).

Other studies that compared early versus late entry into childcare found no differences in attachment behavior, but did find that children in earlier care displayed more positive social interactions than late entry children (Field, 1988). In another study, an early entry group was followed and found that the length of time in quality day care was positively related to number of friends in grade school, number of extracurricular activities, parent ratings of child's emotional well-being, leadership, popularity, attractiveness, assertiveness, and less aggressiveness. A second group of early entry, full-time care children assessed at the sixth grade indicated the positive progression of these findings.

Children who had experienced some childcare early in life in centers of varying quality exhibited more assertive behavior than their late entry peers did. This is consistent with observations of child behavior at the center itself. These findings suggest that advantages of early entry into quality day care centers may linger well beyond early years of schooling (Field, 1991).

On the other hand, infants are said to be more vulnerable than older children to the bad effects of poor quality care. Unfortunately, this predicted interaction between child's age at entry into non-maternal care and quality of care has not been rigorously tested (Gamble, 1986).

Perhaps the most consistent finding about childcare is that participation in some form of non-maternal care has either no effect on cognitive development or has positive effects. However, two recent studies of white, middle class, American samples found that children from advantaged families may be negatively affected by early entry into non-maternal care, particularly full-time care. The explanation of these discrepant findings lies in the complex interaction between center quality, family characteristics, gender, and age at entry as predictors of cognitive development (Howes, 1988).

The inclusion of quality measures in predictive models articulates the relationship between cognitive development and non-maternal care with even more clarity. High quality care has potent positive effects on the cognitive development of children from socially disadvantaged families (Gamble, 1986). Gender may also affect cognitive development since infant girls perform better on tests of cognitive development than their male peers (Harvey, 1999).

Contrary to expectations, type of care has not been predictive of child IQ. The best predictors of cognitive development observed in all children were high family income, high maternal WAIS vocabulary scores, authoritative parenting, and few maternal work hours (Kontos, 1991).

Other studies report that children in child-care exhibited more social behavior, were more popular with their peers, and more cooperative in their play. When contrasts were made between children who spent larger and smaller number of hours in care, hours in care were associated with higher levels of social, cooperative play, seeking the caregiver's attention, and positive affect (Field, 1988).

In 1988, Belsky and Rovine presented data from a meta-analysis of five studies with a total sample of 491 children which focused on the effects of early entry into non-maternal care. The authors concluded that the rates of insecurity for children in care more than 20 hours a week were significantly higher than for children in care less than 20 hours per week, and this pattern was more pronounced when care began during the first year of life. Since not all studies have found this pattern, the meaning of these findings has been debated much over the course of the last several years. Perhaps the most influential study of attachment and child-care experience was based on an impoverished, high-risk sample of mothers (Phillips, 1987). More recent research on the long-term effects of infant child-care clarifies the salience of these findings.

Another study of early entry and social competence at age 4 found less competence in the early entry group, but only in children who had been judged to have insecure maternal attachments (Howes, 1991). This provides evidence that early entry per se may not be a risk factor, but the combination of early entry of children with insecure attachments may increase risk for later behavioral problems.

In spite of the breadth of each of these studies, they do not provide a definitive answer to the question of whether or not early entry into child-care affects on children's later development because the studies differ in their child-care context, measures, definitions of early entry. Many of the studies are also marred by confounds between age at entry, by stability of care, and parental characteristics. All studies find children within the normal range of variation, regardless of childcare experience, and effect sizes should be considered in assessing the social importance of such results.

Few studies have assessed the long-term correlates of maternal employment during infancy. The current investigation will explore the relationship between maternal work status during the respondent's infancy and the quality of these relationships with parents during young adulthood.

Methods

Subjects:

The subjects used in this study were 822 college students. The sample consisted of 264 men and 558 women who were enrolled in introductory psychology courses at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania over the course of several years. The subjects ranged in age from 18-27 years, with a mean age of 18.76.

Procedure:

Participants completed the Maternal Relationship Scale and the Paternal Relationship Scale, the Childhood Appraisal Scale (CAS), and a page designed to obtain background information about each subject. Subjects provided information about their mother's work status at each period of the respondent's development: infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years), preschool (age 2-5), childhood (age 6-12), and adolescence (age 13-15). The subjects were to report whether their mothers worked part-time, full-time or not at all at each stage of development.Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's job; indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue-collar work. The last question on background information requires the subjects to answer whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household at any time throughout their lives. Subjects from single-parent households were excluded from the sample.

The Maternal Relationship Scale and the Paternal Relationship Scale each consisted of four 4-point Likert-style items (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree) assessing the quality of the respondents' current relationships with each of their parents. The Childhood Appraisal Scale (CAS), consists of eighteen 4-point Likert style

items (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree). This questionnaire was created by the experimenters, and aims to measure the subject's perception of the consequences of their mother's work status. Respondents are asked to circle a number from 1 to 4 depending on indicating how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements about how various aspects of their lives would have been better or worse had their mother's work status been different when they were growing up. This permitted an assessment of the perceived impact of fulltime and part-time maternal employment on several dimensions of the respondents' childhood.

Results

Statistical analyses were performed exclusively on the data from subjects whose parents remained married throughout their childhood. Oneway ANOVA (nonemployment, part-time maternal employment, full-time maternal employment during the subjects' infancy) was performed on items assessing the participants' attitudes toward their parents.

Directionally adjusted items were totaled to create a Maternal Relationship Scale and a Paternal Relationship Scale. Oneway ANOVA revealed that scores on the Maternal scale were most favorable for participants whose mothers did not work outside the home during their infancy ($x = 10.36$, s.d. = 2.73, $n = 507$). Subjects whose mothers worked full-time during their infancy rated their current relationships with their mothers most negatively ($x = 8.92$, s.d. = 2.85, $n = 127$). Ratings from subjects whose mothers worked part-time during their infancy fell in between these two groups ($x = 9.74$, s.d. = 2.90, $n = 135$). Oneway ANOVA revealed that scores on the Paternal scale were most favorable for participants whose mothers did not work outside the home during their infancy ($x = 9.92$, s.d. = 3.30, $n = 512$). Subjects whose mothers worked full-time during their infancy rated their current relationships with their fathers most negatively ($x = 8.10$, s.d. = 2.99, $n = 129$). Ratings from subjects whose mothers worked part-time during their infancy fell in between these two groups ($x = 9.25$, s.d. = 3.84, $n = 133$).

On items assessing attitudes towards both mothers and fathers, participants whose mothers were not employed during their infancy described more favorable relationships.

The only exception was in answering the question of whether their father is the type of person they would like to be, participants gave a more favorable reply if their mother worked part-time during their infancy, and the least favorable reply if their mother worked full-time.

	Non-Employment			Part-Time Employment			Full-Time Employment					
	X	sd	n	X	sd	n	X	sd	n	df	f	p
I admire my mother's accomplishments	3.48	.68	543	3.47	.63	137	3.25	.68	130	2/807	6.39	.002
I admire my father's accomplishments	3.48	.73	545	3.46	.92	137	3.16	.81	129	2/808	9.45	.000
I feel comfortable asking my mother's opinion when I'm having a problem	3.34	.78	535	3.04	.90	137	3.34	.78	535	2/798	20.00	.000
I feel comfortable asking my father's opinion when I'm having a problem	2.92	.94	537	2.52	.89	135	2.34	.92	129	2/798	25.72	.000
I am likely to take my mother's advice	3.13	.69	534	3.04	.75	137	2.78	.86	127	2/795	11.53	.000
I am likely to take my father's advice	2.96	.83	534	2.78	.80	135	2.61	.83	129	2/795	10.37	.000
My mother is the type of person I would like to be	2.96	.84	536	2.84	.92	135	2.71	.90	129	2/797	4.85	.008
My father is the type of person I would like to be	2.91	.95	532	3.02	2.28	134	2.55	.94	129	2/792	5,24	.006

Of the 18 CAS items, significant group differences ($p<.01$) were found for 10 items. On all 10 of these items, participants whose mothers were employed full time during their infancy were most likely to report believing that their childhoods would have been more favorable had their mothers' work status been different. Subjects whose mothers were not employed during their infancy expressed the least dissatisfaction with their mothers' work status and blamed it least for various problems. Participants whose mothers' worked part-time scored in between the other two groups.

If my mother's work status had been different when I was growing up,	Non-Employment			Part-Time Employment			Full-Time Employment					
	X	sd	n	X	sd	n	X	sd	n	df	f	p
I feel my life would have been better	1.57	.72	538	1.77	.73	108	1.82	.67	79	2/722	6.83	.001
I feel I would be happier now	1.44	.59	537	1.65	.66	109	1.86	.69	80	2/723	19.70	.000
I feel I would like myself better	1.42	.56	540	1.58	.60	109	1.69	.61	80	2/726	9.84	.000
I feel I would have a better relationship with my mother	1.53	.69	538	1.78	.83	109	1.83	.91	80	2/724	9.55	.000
I feel my family would get along better	1.50	.67	537	1.80	.78	109	1.84	.77	80	2/723	13.76	.000
I feel my mother would have been more sensitive to my needs	1.46	.65	538	1.72	.76	109	1.75	.67	80	2/724	11.27	.000
I feel I would be smarter	1.36	.51	538	1.43	.50	109	1.54	.55	80	2/724	4.74	.009

I feel I would have participated more in sports and clubs	1.48	.71	538	1.46	.57	109	1.71	.77	80	2/724	4.07	.017
I feel my parents' marriage would have been better	1.55	.77	535	1.74	.83	109	1.86	.76	79	2/720	7.40	.001
I feel my mother would be happier now	1.90	.90	535	2.23	.94	109	2.17	.91	80	2/721	8.07	.000

Discussion

This study revealed several significant relationships between history of maternal employment (whether the respondent's mother worked full-time, part-time, or not at all during the child's infancy) and attitudes about both mothers and fathers. Although the present results involve maternal employment during infancy (birth through 1½ years), they may be similar for those whose mothers started working when they were a bit older, since a mother who works during her child's infancy is likely to work throughout her offspring's early childhood.. Future research might examine whether there are any unique effects associated with maternal employment specifically during the first year and a half.

The responses given by the participants may indicate actual relationship impairment attributable to early maternal employment, or it may reflect a more general negative reaction to the notion that "my mother worked my whole life" (as opposed to any specific memories, actual neglect, or injustice).. The more negative ratings of parents who provided their child with a two-paycheck household from infancy may be due to adolescents' assimilation of cultural myths about maternal employment. The impact of maternal employment on children is commonly debated in public. Exposure to such deliberation about the hypothesized negative effects of maternal employment may have affected the respondents' attitudes. This may account for the discrepancy between the current attitudinal findings and the more objective results of many other studies exploring the correlates of maternal employment .

The negative view the participants expressed of their mothers' working may also be a reflection of comparisons between children whose mothers were at home and themselves. Even though many of their friends' parents may have worked, the ones who didn't may stand out because of differences to their own situation and things that were available, or done, or perceived to be better.

The findings in this study, while somewhat alarming given the rising rates of maternal employment during children's infancy, beg for more investigation. Before it can be determined whether these results suggest that maternal employment during infancy is detrimental to the child's subsequent relationships with parents, several factors must be considered. First, the magnitude of group difference in this study was quite small; all groups reported generally positive attitudes toward their parents. Second, since this study was correlational, determination of causal relationships is not possible from this data. Variables other than maternal employment per se may have played a causal role in shaping the modest differences observed between students whose mothers worked full-time during their infancy and those whose mothers were not employed. Factors such as family income level, maternal personality, quality of marital relationship, or parental resentment may have mediated the observed associations. Perhaps in many cases, if mothers have a choice, they would prefer to put off going back to work for a time after having a child. If many of these mothers were in a situation where they did not have the luxury of staying with their infant for any substantial length of time, they may have communicated resentment about their economic circumstances. The negative feelings shown by the respondents may be a reflection of their determination not to be in that situation. It would be interesting to see whether these respondents' attitudes change as they mature and confront their own demands to manage work and family responsibilities.

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